

HELL AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

By J. Brian Clarke

Get any book for free on: www.Abika.com

PART 1

The beginning of the beginning.

After I died, I became a social worker.

It began when the Grim Reaper escorted me into an office with three doors. The door through which we entered was labeled C.S.W., the second H, the third E. There was an antique desk with a computer on it, and an elderly woman in a black dress behind it. After dismissing my anonymously draped, sour smelling companion, she introduced herself.

"How do you do. You may call me Smith. Not Mrs Smith or Ms Smith, just Smith."

"Oh really," I said, as I racked my brain in an attempt to identify the woman. I was sure we had met before. "In that case, I am Leo Ulster Vraskin. Not Mr Leo Ulster Vraskin, just plain Leo Ulster Vraskin." I hoped I had not overdone it.

"Yes Luv," she responded, using the acronym which since grade school had clung to me like an unwelcome albatross. To complete the putdown, she changed the subject. "What is the last thing you remember?"

Somehow I restrained myself. "An operating room, I think. Lights. People leaning over me."

"Very good. Actually, you were badly injured in an automobile accident. They did their best, but--" A shrug of narrow shoulders. "What do you expect? You were drunk at the time."

I took a deep breath. "Am I really dead?"

A thin-lipped smile. "Oh yes."

"What is this place?"

"What do you think it is?"

"An office," I said.

The smile faded to sour. "That is not an answer."

My irritation notched up a level. "I asked first. What is this place?"

"An office."

It was then I decided I was in Hell. So I told the lady to go there.

She chuckled. It was dry, with no mirth.

I looked around for another chair, but there wasn't one. So instead I looked around the room. The walls, except where they were covered by the closed drapes behind the desk, were of rich, unadorned dark wood. Other than a framed newspaper clipping, there were no plaques or pictures. The floor was covered with a thick carpet the same restrained maroon as the drapes. Sparse yet dignified, the place

reflected its occupant like an outer garment.

Smith said, "You have not lived a good life, you know."

On the slight chance the woman exaggerated when she informed me of my demise, I decided not to incriminate myself. "Anything specific in mind?"

She consulted the computer monitor. "According to your file, you started out as an unpleasant child and never grew out of it. You cheated your way through school and college. You got a young woman pregnant, promised to marry her and then abandoned her. You did not even bother to turn up at her funeral. You faked a colleague's research data as your own and got a prestigious award. You swindled your mother out of most of her savings, and after her stroke abandoned her in a public institution. Although you were regularly unfaithful to your wife, you divorced her on trumped-up evidence of her infidelity and got sole custody of your daughter Celia--who you raised according to your own twisted precepts." She looked up. "Have I missed anything?"

"I was a pretty good entrepreneur," I said, determined to defend myself.

"Referring to Vraskin Drugs, I presume."

"Damn right. Given another year or so, that Gates fellow would be breathing my dust!"

She was not impressed. "That is more a matter for our commercial division--who, by the way, did provide appropriate input. But if you wish to discuss--"

"Don't bother," I interrupted, regretting I had brought up the subject. "Let's just get this rigmarole over with, OK?"

"Rigmarole?", she echoed mildly.

"Look, I am quite aware I am headed for an overheated environment staffed by people with pitchforks and a bad attitude!"

"Oh dear, you are confused." Smith touched a computer key and the drapes rolled aside from a large picture window. Sunlight flooded the office; a golden illumination which caressed the skin and did not hurt the eyes. "What do you see?"

For a few seconds I was speechless. I can say I saw lush green fields, rolling hills, the towers and spires of a gleaming city in the distance, and it would be true. But mere words can never describe the overpowering beauty of the place. It was beyond language.

"Is that Heaven?"

"We prefer the name Elysium." A bony finger indicated the door labeled E. "The way is through there. But as you

have pointed out, it is not for you."

I forced my attention to the door then tried not to look again through the window. It was difficult. "You don't need to rub it in," I muttered.

She closed the drapes, making me regret I did not take that second look. "I am glad you appreciate your situation. What else do you know?"

I jerked my thumb at the second door, the one labeled H. "Where that leads."

"Oh that." Again the contemptuous chuckle. "The eternal fire. Is that what you think?"

The woman was toying with me and I did not like it. I yelled, "I know bloody well what H stands for!" I could have screamed at the moon for all the effect it had on her.

She said calmly, "Luv, I am afraid you do not know as much as you think you do. To start with, the letter on that door is only there because my clients expect it. It can just as easily be X for extermination for instance, P for purgatory, and so on. Second, there is no such thing as infinite punishment for a finite crime. That nonsense was dreamed up by the medieval clergy to keep the peasants in line and the tithes coming in. Whatever a person does in a lifetime, is rewarded or punished on a sliding scale appropriate to that person's deeds. We call it justice."

"I have heard of it," I admitted warily.

"And evaded it." Smith lowered her glasses to the end of her nose and regarded me over them. She had the owlish look of a disapproving school teacher. "Until now, of course."

"I think--" I took a deep breath. "You are about to boot me through that door, aren't you?"

"Boot is rather a strong word. But yes, that is where you are going."

I tried not to think what was on the other side, and failed miserably. Even the prospect of better things after my litany of sins was burned out of me, seemed a long, long way off. Then I thought of possible alternatives to fire--a rat infested dungeon perhaps, or slavery under sadistic taskmasters.

"Do I have a choice of punishment?", I asked.

"You do not."

"How long will I have to suffer?"

"It is entirely up to you."

"God," I muttered.

"And Her too, although do not expect too much at the beginning. Just work hard, do what you are told, and in a

century or two subjective you may be allowed through Elysium's door." The woman returned the glasses to the proper place in front of her pale eyes, turned back to the computer and poised a finger. "Now you must go."

I remembered the glorious view through the window, and it makes me feel worse. "Do it," I said.

The finger descended and Hell's door opened.

And opened...

And opened...

PART 2

Later in the beginning.

The worst part is knowing I have been utterly and completely fooled--one hundred and twelve times, so far. During an assignment I know nothing of what has gone before, although my tormentor is creative enough to allow enough leakage to create a nagging sense of *deja vu*. But each time Smith hauls me into her presence after another unsuccessful tilt at another windmill, I recall every humiliating detail of everything which has happened to me since the day I died. It was Hell squared when it began. Now, with all the intact memories of one hundred and twelve disasters, it is Hell raised to the umpteenth power.

If I was alive, I would have become a raving lunatic long ago. But because I am no longer subject to human frailty, I remain fully rational and able to appreciate the exquisite punishment the powers-that-be (with Smith as their very effective instrument) have decreed for me.

But right now I have the distinct impression Smith has mellowed. She has even changed her dress to something not quite as drab. It triggers a faint hope.

"Am I coming to the end of my punishment?", I ask hopefully.

"It is not for me to say."

"That is not an answer!"

"It is as much as you will get."

"Damn you."

"That was taken care of a long time ago, Luv," she says as she jabs her overworked finger on the key which reopens that awful door--

PART 3

The beginning plus one hundred and thirteen.

Although I was never dumped amid fire and brimstone, in terms of pain and aggravation just about all of the assignments were pretty close equivalents. In this case it was a mountain of garbage next to a shanty town on the outskirts of a third world city. Swarms of human scavengers were poking, sifting and sorting on the odoriferous hill, looking for things saleable or eatable.

I will not even try to describe what was considered eatable.

My target was a young girl who had run away from home, presumably to better herself (making sense only if 'home' was a smaller garbage mountain than this one). As I looked for her, I knew nothing about where I came from or who manipulated my strings. I only knew I was as scruffy and smelly as any of the garbage pickers, and as miserable--with the additional handicap of a compulsion to complete the assignment whatever the cost. There was also the nagging feeling I had committed this kind of stupidity before. But I must have been doing something right, because I did not attract attention as I stumbled and clawed amid the refuse.

Finally I saw her; a frail child with long greasy hair and enormous eyes in an endearing little face. As I pretended to pass by, I suddenly reached out and grabbed her elbow. "You must come with me," I told her.

I suppose I should have included 'please'. The pain as she jabbed her sharp little knee into my groin was so excruciating, she only had to give me a contemptuous little push to send me tumbling down the slope. The avalanche which accompanied me to the bottom had enough sharp points to make me feel I was being flailed with barbed wire. To make matters worse as I ended up amid crushed cans, bits of glass and other unidentifiable refuse, was the barrage of missiles and coarse insults rained on me by a half a dozen youths who acted as if they were the waif's Praetorian Guard.

Their obscene merriment was still burning my ears as I forced my battered corpus to its feet and staggered to relative safety behind a pile of rotting timber, where I collapsed and wished for the peace and comfort of hellfire. Nursing my hurts, I waited until the evening sun shone luridly through garbage dust and the smoke of cooking fires. Finally, as the day shift shambled toward the shantytown along with bulging plastic bags which clanked and clinked as they were either dragged or carried, I crept out from behind the pile and watched for the waif.

It was almost dark when I spotted her, chivying along a youth who was bent under a load as big than she was. I

followed at a discreet distance, among other laggards who were similarly burdened. To make myself less conspicuous, I carried one of the pieces of timber--which added to my discomfort as its multi-legged inhabitants decided human flesh was a fitting desert after a main course of half decayed wood.

The girl had the youth dump the load on the dirt floor of a large tent without walls. It was one of several similar establishments which lined the street. Small boys were busy sorting incoming junk into separate piles, re-bagging it and loading it on a truck parked at the back. A man in a dirty apron with a huge front pocket, flicked derrieres with a bamboo cane while he whined imprecations about the lack of descent help.

Gratefully divesting myself of my over-populated burden, I watched the girl haggle with the man. He pursed thick lips, poked a foot at the heap of cans and bottles, then produced a few coins from his voluminous pocket and gave them to the girl. With great disdain, the girl studied the coins. Then she said something which, from the purpling of the man's face, was obviously not a compliment. He gave her a swat which sent her sprawling while the coins bounced out of her hand. Meanwhile, the youth made a great show of being disinterested.

Looking thoroughly like a tearful, cowed child, the girl slowly got to her feet. Sniveling, she approached the man with one small hand extended. Astonished at her temerity (I presumed she was not acquainted with *Oliver Twist*), I waited for the second swat.

It didn't happen. Even as the man's hand lifted, his intended victim launched a flying kick which landed on him in the same vulnerable place her knee had earlier contacted me.

He screeched, clutched his family jewels and mouthed imprecations which were highly descriptive if not entirely practical. Meanwhile the girl calmly retrieved her coins plus others which bounced out of the hopping man's apron. She gave a couple to the youth, who grinned and ran off. Then she strolled into the street.

Beginning to doubt this waif's status as a victim and consequently my own as her savior, I followed as she threaded her way through the crowd until she vanished into an alley between two of the ramshackle structures typical of this unwholesome community. Her disappearance seemed too sudden to be voluntary, so I worked my way across the street, flattened myself against a wall and peered around

the corner into the alley.

This time, I was sure she needed help.

Apparently senseless, she was on her back while a skinny individual with nail scratches down the side of his face was clearly preparing to do more than relieve her of the day's takings. His pants were already at half mast when I launched myself on his back and we both crashed down next to the girl. I am not sure what happened next, other than it involved a whirlwind of blows, shouts, an agonized scream, a pain in my side and then darkness.

When I came to, I was on my stomach in a narrow bed. I tried to move, immediately changed my mind. Not only was my head sore, so was my back from shoulders to butt. I also felt as if a red hot poker was stuck in my side. The mattress on which I lay did not help either. I am sure it was stuffed with an unhomogeneous mixture of gravel and large pebbles.

"I see you are awake."

I twisted my head and saw a woman wearing a starched gray uniform and an unfriendly expression. Her face was vaguely familiar. "I am sister Smith," she announced.

Sister? Between the makeup and heavy gold earrings, she was hardly the product of a convent. "Wh--what happened?", I asked weakly.

"You received a knife wound. Also, your back is badly scraped."

"Will I live?"

"Probably." She did not sound terribly enthusiastic.

"Who brought me here?"

"Two men." Her face twisted. "Unfortunately, they also returned the devil's daughter."

"The devil's--" Now I remembered my assignment, and was even more confused. "This is the orphanage, isn't it?"

She said haughtily, "We are called The House of Charity and Enlightenment. I am the Matron."

"The girl. I was supposed to--"

"As I said, she is here." The woman's tone suggested someone who had found her christmas stocking filled with a large and very ugly potato. She sighed. "Four more years during which I suppose she will keep coming back like a recurring curse." She turned to leave. "The road to hell is truly paved with good intentions, is it not?"

I did not know how to respond to that, and sister Smith did not wait for one anyway as she swept out of the cell and left me with alone with my pains and bruised ego.

In the distance, even beyond the world, I thought I heard a mirthless chuckle--

I had cautiously rolled myself onto my back when the waif crept in later that night. She looked so angelic in a white nightgown, with a candle in her hand, for a moment I accepted the visit as evidence of childish gratitude--until she put the candle down and tried to climb into bed with me.

I yelped, "Get out of here!"

Somehow I jerked my battered body enough she slid off the bed and landed on her aspect with an audible thump. The angel instantly became a harpy. She hissed, her teeth barred like a wildcat about to spring. And then the snarl became a grin. "What's the matter? Can't get it up?"

"You're just a kid."

"Twelve years old, goin' on thirteen." The grin broadened. "But I'm an old soul."

"I doubt you have one," I muttered, wishing she would go away.

She laughed. It was a tinkling, child's laugh. "You don't know--right?"

"Know what?"

"That I need savin' like a maggot needs to be saved from the cheese. After I find what's left worth stealin' in this dump, I'll be back out there--having fun like always."

"Fun? In the garbage?"

She made a face. "I hate clean."

She sat on the edge of the bed. I tensed to re-repel boarders, but fortunately she behaved herself. "Why me?", she demanded.

I sensibly decided not to shrug. "I was told to bring you back to the orphanage."

"Who told?"

I tried to remember. "I don't know," I replied truthfully.

"It couldn't have been the old bag. She hates me."

"The last thing I remember--" I grimaced. "You must have had help."

"It wasn't me. The scum who dragged you here for a few pennies, brought me along for the same reason."

"Dragged me?"

"Each had a foot."

Which explained my sore head and back. I pictured myself being hauled through the streets past grinning spectators, and was grateful I was unconscious at the time.

"What about the fellow who, er--"

"Him?" Again the tinkling laugh as she reached down as if to scratch her leg, suddenly produced a small, wicked looking knife. She looked at it fondly. "He's one of the girls now."

I watched her return the knife to its invisible sheath. The movement was so swift, I wondered if she had been Billy the Kid in a previous life. "You didn't treat me too well either. Dammit, I was trying to help you!"

Her sharp little teeth gleamed in the candlelight. "You got in the way," she told me pleasantly as she yanked the pillow out from under my head and jammed it down on my face. "I don't like it when people do that."

Death by natural causes.

She was too smart to use the knife.

As I faded to black, I had an intense feeling this was not the first time I had expired in such an inglorious and undignified manner--

PART 4

The end of the beginning.

Smith was quite good looking without the glasses, even seemed younger--correction, she was younger. No wonder I had not recognized her until now. I should have realized that time, along with its baggage of pasts, presents and futures, is one tyranny which has no jurisdiction in this place. She had on a dress which shimmered, a floppy hat, and a smile as warm as the sun which shone through the open drapes. The city gleamed in the distance.

"Are you going somewhere?"

She said happily, "In a while. First I want to congratulate you on successful completion of the first phase of your reclamation. At least you will not have to suffer any more indignities."

"That's nice." Each of the numerous times I was in this office, I was mocked by the memories of my assignments--and how I was always suckered. No more indignities? Hah!

She gestured at the window. "I am leaving for a little R and R, after which I will engage in activities considerably more rewarding than--" She looked around her. "--this."

"Who will replace--"

"Do you ever wonder what C.S.W. stands for?"

I shrugged. "I assume Christian something-or-oth--"

"All faiths are equal here, Luv. C.S.W. is Cosmic Social Workers."

"Oh?" A twinge of interest.

"We are the training school for what the locals refer to as Gabriel's Irregulars."

"Gabriel's--" I began.

"Angels," she said as I wondered if she would allow me to finish a sentence. "You know, the people who keep popping up to fix things." She removed the framed newspaper clipping from the wall and tossed it into the waste basket. "I certainly don't need that any more." She pulled on a pair of white gloves, picked up a matching purse and headed for the door marked E.

"Hey, what about me?"

Hand on the doorknob, she stopped and turned. "Oh, didn't I tell you? The desk is yours now. Although you may find the job a little tedious sometimes, you can always liven things up by inserting yourself into the plot--as I often did. Goodby, Leo." It was the first time she used my given name.

She opened the door and stepped outside. I heard the trill of birds, smelled growing things, heard her single comment, "Beautiful!", and the door closed behind her. I went to the window and watched her walk toward the city until she was just a speck in the distance--and was gone. I closed the drapes, turned around and was not surprised to see that the room had adopted itself to the more garish tastes of its new occupant.

I sat behind the huge marble-top desk and looked at the computer screen. A name popped up and lines of data. The C.S.W. door opened and the Grim Reaper brought in my first client. Grimacing at the stench, which made me think of a warehouse full of unwashed socks, I hurriedly dismissed the G.R. Then I introduced myself to the client.

"How do you do. My name is Smith. Not Mr Smith, just Smith--"

Later, as I gloomily wondered how long (subjective time that is) I would be stuck with this job before they allowed me to follow the previous Smith through door E, I noticed the framed clipping in the waste basket. I retrieved it and under the date-line June 6th, 2041 read;

DATE-EXPIRED VACCINE RELABELED AND SHIPPED TO THIRD WORLD
THOUSANDS DIE
C.E.O CELIA VRASKIN CHARGED WITH CONSPIRACY AND MURDER

Now I knew the worst of my sins.
Have a nice eternity, daughter.